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Editorial: Congressman thwarts Texas colleague's intimidation of scientists and lets them do their work.

Thank you, Congressman.

Last summer, U.S. Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., did Americans — and science — a big favor. As chairman of the House Science Committee, he publicly lambasted U.S. Rep. Joe Barton of Texas for using congressional might to harass three climate change scientists. Then Boehlert asked the National Academies of Science to review the scientists' findings. Last week, the academies confirmed that the research was correct.

Barton, R-Ennis, and other climate change skeptics resist government efforts to slow emission of greenhouse gases. The scholars in his cross hairs had made the mistake of showing that Earth's temperatures rose abruptly and sharply in the last 150 years. The 1998 findings, charted in a dramatic "hockey stick" graphic, became a shorthand description of the human-caused warming taking place.

Resenting the message, Barton went after the messengers, demanding they hand over decades of documents, notes from other studies and even credit card receipts. The investigation was necessary, he explained, because "this dispute surrounding your studies bears directly on important questions about the federally funded work on which climate studies rely."

Boehlert, a moderate Republican, fought this assault on reason in the best way possible. He asked a panel of top scientists to review the besieged study. Last week, they reported back. Earth, they announced in their 155-page report, indeed is warmer now than in the past 400 years.

Eight years after the "hockey stick" paper was published, the importance of last week's events is not just scientific. By now, hundreds of studies have created a body of evidence that, taken as a whole, confirms man-made global warming. The controversial paper noted that it was not possible to make definitive interpretations of some data. The theory of human-caused climate change is validated instead by the sheer number of interlocking studies that reach the same conclusion.

Last week's lessons are primarily political. Thanks to the scientific method, any independent scientist can duplicate another's findings, given the same data. That's what the NAS managed to do. And that is why, as Boehlert pointed out, Congress should continue asking independent scientists for counsel.

Boehlert did the country a service by pulling politics away from science. Hounding scientists and smothering their findings have become unfortunate hallmarks of this administration and its closest allies in Congress.

For Boehlert and those who share his views, climate change is not a partisan issue. It's a scientific question with the gravest implications, and experts need total freedom to understand it. Those experts include climatologists, biologists, statisticians and other trained professionals who shuck political affiliation each time they pull on their lab coats. By contrast, unqualified meddlers such as Barton should do nothing to interfere with work being done in the lab.